

Embedding engagement: the example of Queen's University Belfast

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EMBEDDING ENGAGEMENT: THE EXAMPLE OF QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

Tony Gallagher

Introduction

Queen's College, Belfast was founded in 1845 as part of the federated Queen's University of Ireland, with constituent colleges in Belfast, Cork and Galway. Queen's University Belfast was granted independent degree-awarding powers in 1909 at a time when 'civic universities' were opening in many cities of the United Kingdom. In contrast to the 'ancient universities', all of which had been founded as ecclesiastical institutions in which academics were, quite literally, cloistered from the mundane concerns of day-to-day life, the civics were established with a commitment to their cities and regions. Most gave particular emphasis to applied science and technology, not least because they were generally founded in cities with significant industrial strength, and all saw for themselves a role in contributing to economic development as one of their core purposes.

With the partition of Ireland in 1922 – 23, and the establishment of Northern Ireland as a self-governing region within the United Kingdom, Queen's became a pillar of the Northern Ireland establishment. The 1947 Education Act (NI) provided access to free secondary education and presaged an expansion of higher education in the 1960s. The student body at Queen's hitherto had mainly been comprised of Presbyterians, but the 1960s saw an increase in the number of Catholic students, many of whom were influenced by a nascent Civil Rights campaign which challenged religious discrimination in Northern Ireland. On January 1, 1969, a group of about 70 young people, mainly Queen's students in a group called People's Democracy, began a march from Belfast to Derry. This was inspired by the Selma to Montgomery march organized by Martin Luther King, but unlike it, the Belfast to Derry march was attacked by Protestant protestors and received scant protection from the police. The experience of the march was to put renewed energy into the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement.

Towards an engaged university

This contrast between Queen's as an institution at the heart of the social, economic and political establishment in Northern Ireland, and at the same time the location for a campaign for radical change in Northern Irish society, was thrown into sharp relief by the onset of political violence in the Northern Irish Troubles¹. Initially the former instinct prevailed, as research on the conflict was discouraged and Queen's tried to set itself apart from the chaos on the streets. This echoed a

¹ The political violence in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1995 is euphemistically known as the 'Troubles'. Over 3,700 people died and many more were injured in violence involving the security forces, nationalist/republican paramilitaries and unionist/loyalist paramilitaries. The 'Troubles' ended with paramilitary ceasefires in 1995, the withdrawal of the British army from the region and a peace agreement in 1998.

sentiment expressed some years previously by historians of Queen's who described it as a place where:

‘... within its walls the two communities have an opportunity of mingling in an atmosphere of freedom, equality, and mutual respect that they rarely find in any other sphere.’ (Moody and Beckett, 1959: 552)

This was a sentiment enshrined in official policy of the University in 1977 when the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Froggatt, suggested that:

‘Direct university involvement in society negates professional independence and jeopardizes the *contract social* that gives autonomy to the university in return for its institutional neutrality.’ (Froggatt, 1977, cited in Taylor, 1988: 29)

The problem with was that distance, in such contexts, never meant neutrality, but rather placed the institution, by default, on the side of authority. Such complacency as existed was challenged when a PhD study published by an English university claimed that there was a significant under-representation of Catholics in the workforce at Queen's: using a variety of sources the study claimed that only five per cent of staff at Queen's in 1968 were Catholic, and only seven per cent were Catholic in 1968; by contrast it claimed that 27 per cent of staff were Protestant in 1968 and 39 per cent Protestant in 1982 (the remaining staff were identified as having come to Queen's from outside Northern Ireland) (Taylor, 1988). The response of the University to these claims when they received some media attention was terse:

‘Queen's University does not keep any record of the religious affiliation of staff or students. We have no way of checking the claims made, nor do we intend to do so’ (Osborne and Cormack, 1990: 332)

This complacency was shattered following a Fair Employment Agency (FEA) investigation into the University in 1992. The FEA had been created in 1972² as one of the reforms to address the challenges of the Civil Rights movement. The FEA was aimed at addressing religious and political discrimination in Northern Ireland, but had limited power beyond the capacity to carry out investigations into the religious composition of workforces. Employers were encouraged, but not required (until 1990), to monitor the composition of their workforces; and they were encouraged, but not required, to take action to improve any imbalances that might exist. The FEA report confirmed the under-representation of Catholics among employees at Queen's and criticized the university because:

‘... it had not monitored its own employment patterns, it had not reviewed the effectiveness of its recruitment procedures nor had it assessed the impact of its actions on the relative opportunities for employment offered to Protestants and Roman Catholics.’ (Fair Employment Agency, 1989: 43)

² Originally it was established as the Fair Employment Agency. Its powers were significantly increased in 1989 when it was renamed the Fair Employment Commission. In the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement it was merged with other agencies and was renamed the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

In the wake of this, and a number of high-profile tribunal cases for which the University paid significant amounts in settlements, the University established an independent review of its own procedures, the conclusions of which were scathing:

‘there has been 'a singular failure' at the highest levels to investigate allegations of inequality raised by the equal opportunities officer' [and made] ‘more than 200 specific recommendations for changes in procedures ... a complete overhaul of employment practices to ensure equality.’ (Independent, February 15, 1993³)

These investigations did lead to a sea-change in recruitment procedures and the effects were dramatic: in 1991 Protestants comprised 60 per cent of the Queen’s workforce and Catholics 20 per cent Catholic, but by 2015 this had changed to 37 per cent Protestant and 42 per cent Catholic⁴. This period was also marked by a growing level of research directly engaging with issues related to the conflict and division in Northern Ireland, and a more socially engaged approach generally by Queen’s. One of the lessons of this may be that for universities to become more socially engaged requires more than a rhetorical commitment to engagement, but also a conscious and deliberate commitment to social inclusion, and equality in principle and in practice.

Queen’s today

There is little doubt that Queen’s University is now an engaged university, with an active and wide-ranging set of activities underpinning this work. Like many UK universities Queen’s highlights its central role in the local Northern Ireland economy, through the direct and indirect contribution to employment, the supply of highly qualified graduates, the spending power of its staff and students, and its engagement with local business and industry. Queen’s is a signatory of the Manifesto for Public Engagement⁵ which is promoted by the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and includes a commitment:

... to sharing our knowledge, resources and skills with the public, and to listening to and learning from the expertise and insight of the different communities with which we engage.

Central to this Manifesto is the idea of partnership and co-creation with local communities, or publics. This represents the evolution of the approach to the generation and use of academic knowledge, from the days in which knowledge was generated in and for the university; to the time it was made more accessible to people outside the university; to the point where there was an acknowledgement that communities outside the university had useful knowledge and they

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/belfast-university-treats-catholic-staff-unfairly-1473071.html> accessed January 11, 2019

⁴ Figures derived from annual monitoring reports of the Fair Employment Commission, most of which can be access on the website of the Equality Commission Northern Ireland <https://www.equalityni.org/Home> accessed January 9, 2019

⁵ <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/support-engagement/strategy-and-planning/manifesto-public-engagement> accessed January 11, 2019

should be engaged with as partners; to the point where universities and communities co-create knowledge through the joint development of agendas and priorities. Furthermore, recognising that not all communities have the same level of access to, or engagement with, the University, there is also a recognition that engagement should pro-actively seek out connections with under-represented groups.

Queen's University has been moving along this path for considerable time (Gallagher, 2013; Gallagher and Harrison, 2016; McDonald et al., 2016). More recently there has been an attempt to enhance this work and give it a strategic focus by creating a Social Charter⁶. The Social Charter has three main commitments:

- providing leadership, locally and globally
- promoting a positive impact on society through research and teaching
- promoting equality and social justice

These over-arching commitments are realised through seven specific areas of activity, each of which has 'signature projects' which exemplify what the University is seeking to encourage and achieve. Each of the seven activity areas are illustrated by signature projects which represent the much wider body of research, teaching and engagement work going on across the University.

Research with impact⁷

This is designed to encourage researchers to focus on projects with significant impact beyond the academic world, whether this is economic, social or cultural. Among the signature projects currently highlighted within this theme are projects which address, and seek to identify ways to ameliorate, inequalities in access to cancer care across Europe; and work on shared education which promotes collaborative networks between Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland and in other deeply divided societies. Each of these projects is based on high quality research, but the broader impact of the work is seen as central to their focus

Education with a social purpose⁸

This theme encourages the development of teaching and learning programmes which provide opportunities for students to engage with local communities for mutual benefit. Street society is an annual activity for Architecture students and staff in which they work with inner city communities to help them explore their built environment and identify ways in which it might be improved. Some years ago the Queen's University Student's Union established a series of Homework Clubs through which student volunteers support pupils in non-selective schools in areas which did not have a tradition of sending students to higher education. The first Club opened in a Protestant area close to Queen's, but there now exists a network across the city and students act as mentors for the young people.

⁶ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/>, accessed January 9, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/research-impact/>, accessed January 9, 2019

⁸ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/education-social-purpose/>, accessed January 9, 2019.

The Science Shop, which cooperates with a parallel initiative in Ulster University, acts as a brokerage between community organisations and student projects: community organisations identify research projects they would like carried out and the Science Shop identifies students who could work on these projects as part of their degree programmes. The resulting project report is shared with the community organisation which is free to use it in any lobbying activity it is carrying out. This initiative provides a mechanism in which students can get the opportunity to carry out research in real-life contexts, while the community organisations can access university expertise.

Breaking boundaries to produce new knowledge⁹

This theme is focused on encouraging innovation and creativity in tackling important global challenges. One example is provided by work on point of care diagnostic tests which aim to allow rapid, accurate diagnosis of serious bacterial infections in children. Research by the Institute for Global Food Security provided a means of measuring the level of inorganic arsenic in rice and is now focused on developing effective mitigation.

Equality and excellence¹⁰

Queen's' ambition is to support research that is globally excellent, while applying the results of that research for local benefit. A good example of this is provided by work on inner city education zones and, in particular, engagement with the Shankill community. This is a Protestant inner city area which suffers high levels of social deprivation and educational underachievement. It is an area which has suffered significant upheaval as a legacy of the political violence and urban regeneration. A very large number of short-term projects have been carried out in the community, over many years, but there was a growing frustration among community leaders that despite much activity, there was little evidence of real systemic change in the community. Several years ago the community decided to eschew short-term fixes in favour of a longer-term strategic approach that set out to change the life-chances of a new generation on the Shankill. The Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation (CESI) in Queen's has agreed to work with the community on this ambitious, long-term initiative: the partnership means that CESI provides expertise, evidence and experience on the effectiveness and design of interventions, while working with the community on long-term change processes. The fact that this work is taken forward in partnership, and on the basis of a long-term commitment, is crucial.

A significant institutional contribution is provided by the Widening Participation Unit in Queen's which aims to expand social mobility and access to higher education. WPU runs junior and senior academies, focused on elementary and junior high school, and senior high school students respectively, in order to provide them with experience of the university environment. In addition there are specific programmes aimed at supporting mature students and young people who have been in care. For next year an affirmative action scheme, the Pathway Opportunity Programme, is being launched: successful completion of the programme will lead to a reduced offer for admission to one of a number of degree programmes in Queen's.

⁹ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/breaking-boundaries/>, accessed January 9, 2019

¹⁰ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/equality-excellence/>, accessed January 9, 2019

Civic culture and intercultural dialogue¹¹

The aim of this theme is to provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogue and engagement to develop their sense of civic responsibility. One example is provided by SWOT, a student-led charitable medical society which raises money to provide medical equipment each year for developing countries. This is not simply a fund-raising activity, however, as the students undertake placements in the regions where the new equipment is located.

More generally Queen's has provided an important forum for engagement with issues related to political conflict and conflict resolution, and has encouraged students to engage with the challenges of a post-violence society. Queen's has also acted as a venue for high-profile events that have encouraged reflection and consideration of anniversaries from the Troubles and their contemporary significance. One of the most significant was a major event to mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in which former President Bill Clinton, and former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern participated¹². Queen's also hosts a regular series of public lectures in which current political leaders are provided with an opportunity to engage with important policy issues¹³.

Sustainability¹⁴

Climate change and the priority of establishing new and sustainable means for energy production are not just research issues, but also are very concrete societal issues. Queen's runs a number of programmes which examine sustainable energy research and attempt to bridge the gap between industry needs and academic research, covering everything from hybrid buses to large-scale wave energy schemes. The CityZEN initiative¹⁵ contributes to the European Union Smart Cities Programme to kick-start carbon descent in cities through direct design action.

Recognising and rewarding contributions from students and staff¹⁶

Support for initiatives under the Social Charter is encouraged by incorporating themes from it in the appraisal, promotion and rewards system for staff. The Students' Union has run a successful annual awards scheme to recognise student success and participation in entrepreneurship and volunteering. The University has established a Research Impact awards scheme further to encourage research projects which seek to promote social, economic and cultural impact and make a positive difference on society. For students the Degree Plus scheme has been in operation for many years to provide formal acknowledgement of student contribution and achievement

¹¹ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/civic-culture-intercultural-dialogue/>, accessed January 9, 2019

¹² <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/good-friday-agreement-20-years-on/>, accessed January 9, 2019

¹³ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/public-engagement/Events/RobinSwannLecture.html>, accessed January 9, 2019

¹⁴ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/sustainability/>, accessed January 9, 2019

¹⁵ <http://www.cityzen-smartcity.eu/home/about-city-zen/consortium/queens-university-of-belfast/>, accessed January 11, 2019

¹⁶ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/social-charter/recognising-rewarding-contributions/>, accessed January 9, 2019

beyond their degree programme while they were at the University, and a Degree Plus certificate is awarded along with the Degree parchment which all students receive on graduation.

Conclusion

The case of Queen's University provides a useful example of ways in which a university can engage positively with its local city and region and make a positive impact on society. The example highlights the importance of moving beyond a rhetoric of inclusion towards the practice of inclusion, but even then it helps if the institution make a formal commitment to engagement as a strategic priority. The development of the Social Charter is a clear attempt to do this and it reflects the wide range of activities across the University which are encompassed within this priority area. The example of Queen's also highlights the fact that the role of a university changes over time, which is both a strength and a weakness: progressive gains can be reversed, and the challenges posed by Brexit and financial cutbacks risk driving institutional leadership to focus attention on tradition priorities, but the mainstreaming of engaged principles through the Social Charter, and in the reward and recognition system for staff and students, are all strengths. The main lesson of the Queen's University case, in other words, is not only the need to make a positive impact on society, but also to seek to embed this, in as many ways as possible, in the culture and practice of the institution.

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